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ABSTRACT

This report discusses the outcomes of a study that investigated the consistencies and the differences revealed among teachers and school counselors when using the Behavioral and Emotional Rating Scale (BERS) to rate the strengths of children at three separate school levels: elementary, middle, and high school. The sample included 60 children (ages 8-17) suspended from Washington, D.C. area public schools for committing a serious behavioral transgression and placed in an alternative school. Findings suggest that the overall assessment instrument is comprehensive. Analysis of results showed significant convergent validity among raters. However, ratings from both teachers and counselors contained significant amounts of variance and correlated highly with total subscale score. In addition, analysis of the subscale means revealed sources of differences or uniqueness in responses by different informants. Counselors rated children higher on specific family involvement items, and the teachers gave higher scores on school functioning. The most striking results were the consistent differences between school levels in reports by teachers and counselors on almost every subscale. In many instances children at the middle school grade levels were rated as much as 3 points below the normative mean, while elementary school children scored 3 points above the mean. (Contains 12 references.) (CR)

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Teacher and Counselor Perceptions of Children's Strengths at Elementary, Middle, and High School Levels

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Introduction

Researchers interested in assessing children's behaviors stress the importance of obtaining information from multiple sources. The use of information provided by special school mental health service providers to supplement data obtained from teachers provides a broader sampling of children's behavior across settings and time. (Achenbach, 1993; Diamond & Squires, 1993, McConaughy, 1993; Stein & Merrell, 1992). Counselors and psychologists may see competencies, particularly in the social and interpersonal areas, which are masked within a classroom environment (Morris & Arrant, 1978). A different picture may also be obtained in a one-on-one setting rather than in a classroom (Walker, Irvin, Noell, & Singer, 1992).

The Behavioral and Emotional Rating Scale (BERS; Epstein & Sharma, 1997), is a strengths-based instrument that allows for such a multiple assessment approach. Any adult familiar with the child, such as a teacher, a counselor, and the child's parents, can complete the instrument in about 10 minutes. However, if ratings from different sources are to be combined in some additive fashion, inter-rater agreement must be reliable.

The purpose of this study was to determine the consistencies and the differences revealed between teachers and school counselors when using the BERS to rate the strengths of children at three separate school levels (elementary, middle, and high school). All of these children were placed in an alternative school for committing a serious behavioral transgression. The study was designed to give information about adjustments that might need to be made when interpreting scaled observational rating instruments from different respondents and at different school levels. To achieve this end, strengths data from teachers and counselors were evaluated to determine whether ratings by these different informants reflect the same underlying theoretical construct (convergent validity). A second focus was to assess possible differences associated with teachers' and health professionals' ratings of children's strengths at different grade levels.

Method

Subjects

Sixty children who were suspended from Washington, D.C. area public schools for serious behavioral transgressions and placed in an alternative school participated in this study. Criteria for inclusion in this study were a BERS completed by a teacher and a school counselor and that the child had spent at least 30 days at an alternative school. The children ranged in age from 8 to 17. The breakdown by school level was representative of the general population within these alternative schools and consisted of 11 children in elementary school grades, 10 at the middle school grades, and 39 at the high school grade levels. All of the counselors were residents in the alternative schools. Teachers met with the children at least once every school day and counselors met with the youth at least once a week.

Materials

The BERS is a 52-item instrument designed to assess strengths in children ages 5-18 in five categories: Interpersonal Strengths, Family Involvement, Intrapersonal Strengths, School Functioning, and Affective Strengths. The rating for items within all five subscales is made on a 4-point Likert-type scale. Information from the BERS is useful when evaluating children for pre-referral services and in placing children for specialized services.

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Statistical Approach

Campbell and Fiske (1959) developed the multitrait-multimethod (MTMM) design as a way of evaluating the construct validity of behavioral and psychological measures. This design was used to measure the five BERS subscales (traits), each of which were measured by both teachers and counselors (methods). This resulting correlation matrix was then evaluated to determine the presence of convergent validity. The coefficients also provided estimates of the unique contribution of different raters to the measurement of each strength domain.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Internal consistency reliabilities of the individual subscales were extremely high and were consistent with the published normative data, ranging from .894 to .938 for the counselors and .859 to .931 for the teachers. The correlations between counselors and teachers when responding to the same subscale ranged from .444 to .540. Of the five subscales, Family Involvement, School Functioning, and Affective Strengths had correlations above .50. Pearson product-moment correlations above .50 represent large degrees of association (Cohen, 1977), especially when they are between different types of informants (Achenbach, McConaughy, & Howell, 1987; Ozer, 1985; Rosenthal, 1983). In addition, it is clear that counselors are typically providing data that are different from teachers. This has implications for situational specificity and for educational assessment.

Analysis of Subscale Means

Raw scores were converted to standard scores in order to make ratings comparable across subscales and between raters. These standard scores have a predetermined mean of 10 and a standard deviation of 3 for each subscale. It is important to note that the BERS provides normative scaling by gender but not by age or grade level.

The resulting means and standard deviations for each subscale by rater and school level are shown in Table 1. There was a great deal of consistency in ratings of the same children by the two respondent groups. However, there were large differences in the mean strength scores at the different school levels. Children in middle school received the lowest strength scores, those in elementary

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics of Standardized Strength Subscale Scores by Rater and School Level

		Teacher			*Counselor*		
		Elementary	*Middle*	*High*	*Elementary*	*Middle*	*High*
Interpersonal	*M*	11.73	8.20	12.21	12.73	9.20	11.67
	SD	(4.00)	(2.35)	(3.06)	(3.29)	(1.87)	(3.24)
Fam. Involve.	*M*	13.73	7.00	10.08	14.00	9.90	9.87
	SD	(1.49)	(1.41)	(3.25)	(2.57)	(2.77)	(2.67)
Intrapersonal	*M*	13.09	11.10	12.08	14.64	9.90	10.56
	SD	(2.70)	(2.02)	(3.62)	(1.86)	(2.69)	(3.78)
School Funct.	*M*	11.18	8.50	10.41	11.09	7.80	9.28
	SD	(2.13)	(3.75)	(3.93)	(2.02)	(4.13)	(4.06)
Affective	*M*	12.36	8.60	10.31	14.09	8.60	9.74
	SD	(3.53)	(2.27)	(2.91)	(2.39)	(2.12)	(3.82)

Note: Higher scores represent higher ratings
Normative mean = 10, standard deviation = 3

school the highest scores, and scores for the high school students were in the middle. In every case except for the teachers' ratings of intrapersonal strengths, the middle school children were scored below the normative subscale mean. Counselors assessed these students' school functioning more than 2 points below the mean and teachers rated family involvement 3 points below. Conversely, both respondent groups rated children in elementary grades above the respective normative means on every subscale. In general, counselors' ratings for elementary school children were higher than teachers' ratings, and the reverse occurred at the high school level.

A 2 (rater) x 3 (school grade level) x 5 (subscale) repeated measures factorial analysis of variance was used to examine differences in mean standardized strength scores. The between groups factor was School Level and the within groups factors were Rater and Subscale. Results of the ANOVA are shown in Table 2 and significant main effects and interactions were interpreted with a series of post-hoc multiple comparisons.

There were no significant differences in strength ratings between the two respondent groups. This was also observed at each of the school levels, as reflected in the non-significant Rater x School Level interaction.

The significant main effect of Subscale was partly the result of both teachers and counselors scoring the children higher on intrapersonal and interpersonal strengths than on other strength subscales. In general, counselors rated these children significantly lower in school functioning while teachers rated them lower in family involvement, resulting in a significant Rater x Subscale interaction.

The main effect of School Level was readily interpreted. On a majority of the subscales both sets of raters gave significantly higher strength scores to elementary school children and significantly lower strength scores to middle school children. Differences by school level were particularly apparent on the Affective and Family Involvement subscales, resulting in a significant School Level x Subscale interaction.

Table 2
Analysis of Variance of Standardized Strength Scores by School Level, Subscale, and Rater

ANOVA Summary Table

Source	*SS*	*df*	*MS*	*F*	*p*
Between subjects		59			
School Level (L)	847.61	2	423.80	8.36	.001
Subj w. groups	2891.05	57	50.72		
Within Subjects		840			
Subscale (S)	203.02	4	50.76	8.45	< .001
L x S	177.47	8	22.18	3.69	< .001
L x Subj w. grps	1369.17	228	6.01		
Rater (R)	2.90	1	2.90	.16	.695
L x R	74.60	2	37.30	2.00	.144
R x Subj w. grps	1061.26	57	18.62		
S x R	37.14	4	9.29	3.51	.008
L x S x R	48.02	8	6.00	2.27	.024
S x R x Within	602.91	228	2.64		

Discussion

These findings suggest that the overall assessment instrument used in this study is comprehensive. The BERS appears to be an important test that can be used by either teachers or counselors to get an indication of a child's strengths. In addition, if both respondents complete the BERS form, each professional may provide important information that might be missed by the other.

Analysis of the matrix and the ANOVA results showed significant convergent validity between raters. However, ratings from both teachers and counselors contained significant amounts of variance and correlated highly with the total subscale score. Therefore, the scores may be considered valid indicators of the different strength dimensions measured on the BERS. Establishing such convergent validity among counselors and teachers supports the use of a multi-source approach to assessment of children's strengths.

In addition, analysis of the subscale means revealed sources of differences or uniqueness in responses by different informants. Counselors rated children higher on specific family involvement items, and teachers gave higher scores on school functioning. There is no question as to the importance of showing strengths that span diverse situations within the school environment. However, significant situational factors may also play a role in the determination and assessment of a child's strengths. That is, there may be real differences in the same behaviors as observed by teachers and counselors. For example, a child's behaviors within a counseling or advisement session may be completely different than in the classroom, where other activities become more important.

The most striking results were the consistent differences between school levels in reports by teachers and counselors on almost every subscale. In many instances children at the middle school grade levels were rated as much as 3 points below the normative mean, while elementary school children scored 3 points above the mean. For researchers interested in building or testing theories of applying strength information to the education of children with behavioral disorders, it is apparent that age and grade effects must be considered so that unbiased estimates of the strength concept can be obtained. Only when normative grade level data are provided can legitimate cut-off scores be set on the BERS for the appropriate interpretation of these strength scores.

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